

THE LAST BREATH IS HERS: REASSESSING FEMINIST FILM APPROACHES TO THE  
SLASHER GENRE IN THE #METOO ERA

A Paper  
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty  
of the  
North Dakota State University  
of Agriculture and Applied Science

By  
Hannah Leigh Stevens

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of  
MASTER OF ARTS

Major Department:  
English

April 2019

Fargo, North Dakota

North Dakota State University  
Graduate School

---

Title

THE LAST BREATH IS HERS: REASSESSING FEMINIST FILM  
APPROACHES TO THE SLASHER GENRE IN THE #METOO ERA

---

By

Hannah Leigh Stevens

---

The Supervisory Committee certifies that this *disquisition* complies with North Dakota State  
University's regulations and meets the accepted standards for the degree of

**MASTER OF ARTS**

SUPERVISORY COMMITTEE:

Dr. Emily Wicktor

---

Chair

Dr. Alison Graham-Bertolini

---

Hardy Koenig

---

Approved:

4/08/19

---

Date

Dr. Rebecca Weaver-Hightower

---

Department Chair

## ABSTRACT

*You're Next* (2011) and *Hush* (2016), feature women who at first glance resemble stereotypical final girls. However, throughout their respective films, Erin (*You're Next*) and Maddie (*Hush*) break the expected binary outcome of either a dead girl or franchised final girl, and are recognized as a different iteration of the final girl—a girl who both survives a brutal attack and is able to actively bring resolution to the narrative, representing a turn toward critically and socially sensitive representations of a woman's experience. In seeing this current trajectory of Erin to Maddie to a new Laurie (*Halloween* 2018), a revolutionary trend develops that fractures, complicates, and invigorates tired slasher tropes. By recognizing and tracing this trend I give voice to and identify a theory that complicates the final girl, encompasses both of these women characters, and places these films in the realm of a more complex, feminist, depiction of horror.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

My deepest gratitude to Dr. Emily Wicktor, the chair of my committee, who continuously inspires me to be a better academic and a better human. Without Dr. Wicktor this paper would not exist and I would still be at square one, thinking no one would ever support my analysis of horror films. I would also like to thank Dr. Alison Graham-Bertolini for showing me that vigilante women are incredibly badass and worthy of exploration and for pushing me to produce work that I never would have been able to otherwise. Thank you to Hardy Koenig for providing an extra set of eyes toward my project and asking me questions about Brechtian theory. In addition, I would like to thank Krista Aldrich who reminded (and lovingly threatened) me that I could do this and Mike Bittner who continues to be my horror go-to person, and put up with many conversations over the last year. Thank you to everyone who supported this project, my parents, my graduate family, and the amazing professors in the English department. And finally, a huge thank you to my incredible husband, Jordan Honeyman, who never once complained about the constant filmic screaming that often emerged from another room. Thank you.



## **DEDICATION**

To all the women out there with an axe to grind. I'm there with you.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
DEDICATION.....	v
LIST OF FIGURES .....	vii
"HE'S WAITED FOR THIS NIGHT... HE'S WAITED FOR ME... I'VE WAITED FOR HIM": INTRODUCTION.....	1
FILM SUMMARY/FORECAST *SPOILER ALERT*.....	14
"I CAN COME IN ANYTIME I WANT. AND I CAN GET YOU, ANYTIME I WANT": MALE GAZE/VOYEURISM.....	18
"GRAB ANYTHING THAT MIGHT MAKE A GOOD WEAPON": WEAPONRY, FIGHTING BACK, AND A CULTURALLY CONSIDERATE REPRESENTATION.....	27
"I STUCK A BLENDER ON HIS HEAD AND KILLED HIM": FINAL SCENES, TOXIC FEMININITY, AND THE <i>FINAL</i> FINAL GIRL .....	35
"STAY HERE. I'VE GOT TO FINISH THIS": CONCLUSIONS.....	40
WORKS CITED .....	43

## LIST OF FIGURES

<u>Figure</u>	<u>Page</u>
1. Erin from <i>You're Next</i> .....	3
2. Maddie from <i>Hush</i> .....	3
3. Michael Meyers watches Laurie Strode as she walks home in <i>Halloween</i> (1978).....	7
4. The most recognizable final girl, Laurie Strode, in the 1978 <i>Halloween</i> .....	10
5. “Lamb Mask,” “Tiger Mask,” and “Fox Mask” <i>You're Next</i> .....	14
6. “The Man” <i>Hush</i> .....	15
7. “The Man” watching Maddie through the sliding door as she works in <i>Hush</i> .....	19
8. View from Michael’s mask after killing his sister Judith in <i>Halloween</i> 1978.....	21
9. “The Man’s” perspective of Maddie in <i>Hush</i> .....	22
10. Maddie’s perspective of “the Man” in <i>Hush</i> .....	23
11. “Tiger Mask” emerging through the window in <i>You're Next</i> .....	25
12. Erin watches for the killer to cross the light through the keyhole in <i>You're Next</i> .....	29
13. The killer’s view of the trap right inside of the window in <i>You're Next</i> .....	32
14. The audience’s view of both board traps in <i>You're Next</i> .....	32
15. The killer after stepping on the board he did not see in <i>You're Next</i> .....	33
16. The final moments of <i>Hush</i> .....	37
17. Erin collapses to the floor after fighting off Felix and Zee in <i>You're Next</i> .....	39

**“HE’S WAITED FOR THIS NIGHT... HE’S WAITED FOR ME...I’VE WAITED FOR HIM”: INTRODUCTION**

One of the most notable slasher films is John Carpenter’s 1978 masterpiece *Halloween*. *Halloween* introduced audiences to the defining features of a slasher film complete with a stereotypically masked killer (Michael Meyers), who stalks babysitters in a realistic small town, killing with a kitchen knife, until finding the film’s heroine and final girl, Laurie Strode, played by Jamie Lee Curtis, whom he continues to stalk in the sequels. As Adam Rockoff expertly states, “It [*Halloween*] is the blueprint for all slashers and the model against which all subsequent films are judged” (55). The 2018 sequel by the same name, takes place 40 years after Michael Myers’ killing spree in Carpenter’s 1978 original. *Halloween* franchise enthusiasts are aware of the string of sequels and remakes released<sup>1</sup> before the 2018 *Halloween*; however, the director of the 2018 sequel, David Gordon Green, has opted to ignore the films that followed Carpenter’s original, rejecting also the well-known twist that the characters, Michael and Laurie, are siblings. Danny McBride, one of the 2018 film screenplay writers states that he was “pushing for that removal right off the bat” stating that he “just felt like that was an area where he [Michael] wasn’t quite as scary anymore. It seemed too personalized. I wasn’t as afraid of Michael Myers anymore, because I’m not his... brother, so he’s not coming after me... and what does that open up for us if it [was] this random killing that has affected this character?” (qtd. in Jackson).

Instead of focusing on the sequels and the Rob Zombie remakes, the 2018 *Halloween* revisits the character of Laurie in present day. What audiences witness is Curtis’ portrayal of Laurie’s trauma in the aftermath of Michael’s original murder spree, as the character lives her

---

<sup>1</sup>11 total (including *Halloween* 2018). Nine sequels and two remakes (“All Halloween Films in Order”).

life believing he will break out of the institution he is locked in and find her again, thus characterizing Laurie as mostly reclusive and on edge. The narrative in the 2018 *Halloween* also reveals that Laurie's two marriages have fallen apart and she lost custody of her daughter Karen (Judy Greer), who has since distanced herself and her daughter Allyson (Andi Matichak), from Laurie. Slasher audiences, who are weary of female victimization (especially female viewers), appreciate a clear attention to the plight of women, and recognize a more sensitive approach on screen to the everyday life of a woman affected by a chain of traumatic events. However, what the 2018 *Halloween* fails to address is a resolution to Laurie's horror narrative.

Two lesser-known recent films, *You're Next*<sup>2</sup> (2011) and *Hush* (2016), feature women who at first glance resemble stereotypical final girls, created for the franchising of slasher films. However, throughout their respective films, Erin<sup>3</sup> (*You're Next*) (fig. 1) and Maddie Young (*Hush*) (fig. 2) break the expected binary outcome of either a dead girl or franchised final girl, and are thus recognized as a different iteration of the final girl—that is, a girl who both survives a brutal attack and is also able to actively bring resolution to the narrative. More importantly though, they represent a turn toward critically and socially sensitive representations of a woman's experience, as unlike the 2018 *Halloween* there is a resolution and finality to both characters narratives. This “true” ending results in a more complex feminist representation of women in the horror film. In seeing this current trajectory of Erin to Maddie to a new Laurie, I am witnessing a revolutionary trend that fractures, complicates, and more importantly invigorates tired slasher tropes. By recognizing and tracing this trend I am giving voice to and identifying a theory that complicates the final girl, encompasses both of these women characters,

---

<sup>2</sup> *You're Next* was originally released in 2011, but had a US premiere in 2013 (*You're Next*).

<sup>3</sup> No credited last name (*You're Next*).

and places both of these films in the realm of a more complex, and socially sensitive, feminist, and perhaps female driven, depiction of horror.



Fig. 1. Erin from *You're Next*.



Fig. 2. Maddie from *Hush*.

To see a slasher that thoughtfully lingers on the other side of victimization provides audiences a new connection to and appreciation for the slasher film; however, female audiences haven't always felt appreciation toward this genre. Linda Williams, in *The Dread of Difference Gender and the Horror Film*, postulates that often women are unable to witness the terrors that play out on the screen stating, "there are excellent reasons for this refusal of the woman to look,

not the least of which is that she is often asked to bear witness to her own powerlessness in the face of rape, mutilation, and murder” (17). In the eyes of female viewers, the victimized women on the screen are too close a representation of real women. Regardless, horror films are, in fact, able to make audiences feel a certain way, through the way the genre allows audience members to connect emotionally to the characters on screen. Jody Keisner in her article, “*Do You Want to Watch? A Study of the Visual Rhetoric of the Postmodern Horror Film*,” states, “horror movies are designed to direct emotions and entire thought processes, possibly the single largest influence on humans’ interpretation of reality” (413). Keisner continues by exploring the “perceptions of reality” through the slasher film (413), stating that if audiences are meant to see reality within a slasher film<sup>4</sup>, then it is a short jump to asserting that the slasher genre has the ability to affect the perception of reality of the audience. However, most viewers attend a movie so that they do not actually experience what is happening on screen even though what they are viewing is a realistic portrayal of violence. They would rather view the film and the violence than experience it first hand. Regardless of who watches at the core of this conversation is the idea of the horror film psychologically and at times physically sticking with the audience in various ways.

The horror film plays an intensive role in physically effecting the audience, involving as noted by Linda Williams in “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess,” an “almost involuntary mimicry of the emotion or sensation of the body on the screen” (144). The intense focus on agitated bodies within the genre works to also agitate the body of the spectator directly. To further this point, in his article “Why Horror?” Noël Carroll states that the “horror genre gives every evidence of being pleasurable to its audience, but it does so by means of trafficking in the

---

<sup>4</sup> In that it is a violent man versus a vulnerable woman in a realistic setting that has some internal meaning or familiarity to the audience.

very sorts of things that cause disquiet, distress, and displeasure” (33). Audiences are drawn to horror, and horror sticks in their mind because of the way it comments directly on realistic, yet violent, scenes of society. Furthermore, the defining feature of a horror film is the ability of the film to make the audience uncomfortable, and to leave them thinking after the film has ended. This fear is why many audiences leave the theater thinking, as James Sabata addresses in his article “Horror Films as Social Commentary,” where he states, “it could be the unease you feel that microsecond before you look up at the mirror, fearing someone else will be seen in the mirror alongside you. Hours after watching a film... days, or even years, movies stay with us... Truly great horror never lets go” (Sabata). Overall, fear has a tendency to stick with people.

The audiences’ conscious or unconscious reaction is further theorized through psychoanalysis. As theorists Julia Kristeva in *The Powers of Horror* and Barbara Creed in *The Monstrous Feminine* hypothesize, the reaction to the horror film and the ability for it to stick in the mind of the viewer is theorized through the notion of the abject as well as the representation of the monstrous. Kristeva terms “abjection” as that which does not “respect borders, positions, rules,” and that which “disturbs identity, system, order” (4). As Creed furthers, “Kristeva is attempting to explore the different ways in which abjection works within human societies, as a means of separating out the human from the non-human and the fully constituted subject from the partially formed subject” (8). At the core of abjection is this ability for human forms to push abject self-images behind an invisible border so that it does not disrupt life. For example, though humans may be able to they do not bite off their fingers, because the act of doing so is considered abject, and socially disruptive to life. As Creed further notes, audiences can see the idea of abjection clearly in horror films such as *The Hills Have Eyes* with the eating of human flesh being the abject self that audiences push to the other side of their imaginary borders (9), the



line between expected social and civilized behaviors that mark humans different or more civilized from that which is abject. The slasher film works in a similar way. Though people might have the urge to kill each other (the monstrous self), often they do not allow themselves to be brought into abjection, as they follow the socially acceptable and socially sanctioned rules of human behavior. However, as stated above, the horror film is the bridge that lets audiences explore their internal abjection and ultimately their monstrous selves in a safe and culturally appropriate way.

Because the abject content of a slasher film lingers in the psyche, and ultimately permeates into the daily lived lives of the people watching, who then must address lived social and sexual politics, the horror genre becomes the perfect vehicle for social commentary. As Jason Wallin states, “It’s not about the scare tactics so much as the unconscious fears. Horror is a speculation on a potential future and it tries to elevate those anxieties to conscious thought” (qtd. in Barnes). The slasher genre is also able to take up the human condition in complex and intense ways especially as it relates to portrayals of gender, as audiences are witness to overly masculinized men and over (as well as under) feminized women. The most notable element in the slasher formula then becomes the constant watching and observing performed by audience members who are sutured<sup>5</sup> to those watching and observing within the film, as without their gaze the cultural importance would not be there. Taking Kaja Silverman’s argument in *The Subject of Semiotics* into account illuminates that in a horror film, audiences “intrude” upon the violent acts, but also simultaneously participate by watching and gazing upon the violence (206). They are sewn (or sutured) into the narrative in ways that they cannot escape. This voyeurism on the

---

<sup>5</sup> As Kaja Silverman notes, “‘Suture’ is the name given to the procedures by means of which cinematic texts confer subjectivity upon their viewers” (195).

part of the audience and ultimately the killer in a slasher film has real and social consequence, especially when the woman being gazed upon is trapped in this cyclical revisiting of trauma via the same narrative of violence, because audiences are witnessing and thus participating in this violence. As the gaze and the social consequence are always present, the voyeurism of the audience and the killer is presented as a template for the slasher film, one that the film cannot continue without. Audiences recognize it instantly in the 1978 *Halloween* as Michael gazes at his sister, Judith, sexualizing her before killing her. He does the same throughout the film with other female victims, and proceeds to gaze upon the film's heroine, Laurie, providing an even more male gaze oriented template for the final girl (fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Michael Meyers watches Laurie Strode as she walks home in *Halloween* (1978).

The male gaze is a concept that is by definition present in the horror film, and in a film that revolves around violent man versus vulnerable woman, near impossible to eradicate. Laura Mulvey in her landmark essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” asserts, “The cinema offers a number of possible pleasures. One is scopophilia. There are circumstances in which looking itself is a source of pleasure, just as, in the reverse formation, there is pleasure in being looked at” (59). She goes on to describe that the pleasure as mentioned above is split, “between

active/male and passive/female” (62). Film viewers recognize the male gaze (or scopophilia) in horror scenes where violence toward women is seen as a spectacle, a gaze that perhaps makes it hard to look away, which makes the gaze that much more problematic. Regardless, there are always the constants within the horror film genre and more specifically the slasher genre. If audiences have grown to expect many of the elements mentioned above—the subject who is gazed upon by subjects who are doing the gazing; the typical toxic femininities and masculinities; the abject; the voyeuristic drive, and suture—what then happens to these constants when the elements, and perhaps the most influential element, is changed?

One of the more problematic representations of gender applies to the final girl, or the “image of the distressed female most likely to linger in memory...the one who did not die: the survivor” (Clover 35). The first and most recognizable character to completely embody the final girl archetype is Laurie Strode in the 1978 *Halloween* (fig. 4). In her 1992 text *Men, Women, and Chainsaws* Carol Clover theorized and gave language to the phenomena of the one female character to survive the film; the final girl. However, Clover’s observed final girl is not simply the surviving female character. She also has very specific criteria: she is the (implied) main character, she is not sexually active, she is watchful and is tuned in to signs of danger, and lastly she is boyish and not fully feminine (39-40). Though many of these elements refer to final girls who were observed whilst Clover was theorizing, since the naming and theorizing of the final girl slasher films have continued to revolve around this character trope, often problematically victimizing the final girl in various ways in order to keep the film franchise functioning. This cyclic victimization is not only problematic, but also largely unrealistic, as audiences saw from the *Halloween* sequels that involved Laurie, who screenwriters placed in a position to be victimized time and time again with no comment. The final girl thus becomes a character who is

thoughtlessly victimized in order to stick to the demands of a genre that provides little critical commentary on her behalf. Horror scholars and film critics constantly harken back to the language surrounding the final girl, to the extent that her appearance in a slasher film is considered *the* slasher trope<sup>6</sup>. The theorizing of the explicit guidelines of the final girl cements her appearance, which, perhaps, perpetuates such a vital, unbreakable female character in slasher films, as she fits the genre needs of a stock character, victimized woman that audiences can gaze on. More problematically the final girl is inherently developed and strategically placed in a film for the franchise to continue (i.e., Laurie Strode *Halloween*; Sidney Prescott *Scream*<sup>7</sup>; Nancy Thompson *A Nightmare on Elm Street*) and overall for the watching to continue over and over. Thus labeling a woman a “final girl” or implying that this type of character is prevalent within a film, comes with standards that women characters *must* conform to, which are neither realistic nor without problems, as many witness from Laurie, and involve victimizing the woman character over and over. As women are labeled as final girls they are thus limited to certain conventions, which thus limit the roles women *could* portray. In addition, labeling a woman a final girl places her in this cycle of trauma that continues without comment or objection; she becomes a *franchised* final girl.

---

<sup>6</sup> To my knowledge most slasher films include the presence of a final girl, which allows me to assert that her presence in a slasher film is one of the most present and problematic tropes. However, it is important to note that *Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Beginning* does not include a final girl.

<sup>7</sup> It is worth noting that the original *Scream* (1996) film has been theorized as a satire, using many slasher elements to its benefit (Alemoru). Though it still continues to use the final girl and continues to victimize her throughout all four films.



Fig. 4. The most recognizable final girl, Laurie Strode, in the 1978 *Halloween*.

Forcing women characters to reenact stereotypical conventions of the final girl character, and further victimizing her forces a toxic opinion onto audiences. “Toxic femininity” is what I call forcing women to conform to who they aren’t or refusing to allow women to grow within a film genre, becoming who they could be, similar to the idea of toxic masculinity. Toxic femininity is as much a cultural regression as toxic masculinity is. We see toxic femininity in horror films just as much as we see toxic masculinity in the form of overly violent men. By cyclically objectifying women, without comment, and enforcing the franchised final girl in a slasher film, audiences, directors, producers, etc., are directly promoting and perpetuating toxic femininity. The true danger of the franchised final girl is that her presence entrenches audiences and characters in this realm of toxic femininity that is just as odious as toxic masculinity.

Audiences have witnessed toxic femininity through prior iterations of Jamie Lee Curtis as Laurie and her return in 2018 is perhaps the horror response audiences need in order to witness a new paradigm for women in a ‘Me Too’ and a sexual politically driven world. Kate Millett in her groundbreaking 1969 text *Sexual Politics*, describes sex as being a “status category with political

implications” (24), one such implication being the use of force in regards to acts of sexual violence (43). The contemporary ‘Me Too’ movement<sup>8</sup> focuses directly on this issue of force and violence and the prevalence of such in society as it directly applies and works in opposition to women. The movement is as much about the current political moment as it is about the historical trajectory of force in regards to male and masculine power and female and feminine vulnerability and fear of those masculine powers. This forceful political implication follows into modern film, especially the slasher film, which revolves around violence toward women by men and the fear of such in both the female characters and audience members. Just as the ‘Me Too’ movement emerged to address real-world violence, so too must a critical and reevaluated assessment of the slasher film emerge revisited, so audiences can productively enjoy, but also make a critical assessment of the real-world implications of this kind of sexualized violence, threat, and fear.

As audiences saw in *Halloween* 2018, after years of victimization, Laurie is finally given a culturally and emotionally sensitive response to her character’s victimization, a move that situates the film within the context of the ‘Me Too’ movement. Moreover, this move toward approaching her victimization with sensitivity can be attributed to Jamie Lee Curtis who reflected that, “Women and men, all over the world, are starting to stand up and say: ‘This happened to me, but it does not have to be the definition of me.’ We made a horror movie that’s super scary but at its core is the subject of trauma. But in the world, we are having a conversation that has been silenced for a very long time” (qtd. in Lou). What the 2018 *Halloween* represents is a turn toward a more humane, thoughtful, and critically sensitive depiction of a traumatized

---

<sup>8</sup> According to the “About” page of [metoomvmt.org](http://metoomvmt.org), the ‘me too’ movement was founded by Tarana Burke in 2006 as a response to finding “pathways to healing” for sexual abuse survivors in primarily black communities (“About”). Because of the viral nature of the #metoo campaign, which was taken to social media, sexual violence has become a national conversation, expanding to include a wide spectrum of survivors.

woman within a slasher film. Though the film is not without fault, it presents a realistic argument for the plight of an original final girl who has endured years of victimization. She is a final girl in that she has survived, but Laurie is able to show audiences a more thoughtfully constructed traumatized character, which makes her more than the characteristics of the final girl trope.

Though the *Halloween* franchise may not be the first<sup>9</sup> to use some of the trope-worthy slasher elements, it is the first to use them all together as a singular slasher paradigm, which makes the 2018 *Halloween* remake all the more influential. Though the 2018 *Halloween* still conforms to many of the tropes that the 1978 film cemented, the final girl is altered. Throughout the film Laurie is on high alert and though this isn't unique for the final girls in-between 1978 and 2018, slasher audiences have yet to see trauma portrayed in a thoughtful and sensitive way, in that as a character Laurie is still feeling the affects of the 1978 attack, and the 2018 portrayal of this character takes into account the psychological and physical damage of being a repeatedly attacked and violated final girl. Thus, a final girl character that is able to reflect on her trauma within a slasher narrative, which allows audiences to also consider her journey, is an unprecedented move in a genre that typically disregards such critical narrative content.

However, what is missing from the 2018 *Halloween* is the finality, or resolution, to the final girl's franchising. The 2018 *Halloween* presents the unprecedented use of three final girls in the finale, a move that suggests the likelihood of further victimization of three women in subsequent sequels, as post-credit roll audiences hear Michael breathing, despite being burned alive in the final moments of the film by Laurie, her daughter, and her granddaughter. The 2018 *Halloween* is introducing its audience to a culturally sensitive, realistic depiction of a final girl who is beginning to approach her trauma through a critical lens, but in leaving audiences with

---

<sup>9</sup> The birth of the slasher film is often attributed to Alfred Hitchcock's 1960 film *Pyscho* (Rockoff 26).

this final scene, the film is offering only a taste of a possible resolution to Laurie's journey. Michael's breathing gives less certainty to Laurie's narrative and forecasts further victimization, presenting audiences with the opportunity to reflect, but not entirely. Laurie has yet to escape the franchising cycle, but audiences are glimpsing the possibility of an altered expectation.

The 2018 *Halloween* film has successfully opened the doors for a more complex understanding of gender representation within the slasher genre, starting with the fraying of the threads of the constraints that surround the final girl, and altering audience expectation. Though the presence of Laurie's trauma in *Halloween* represents a crucial move, it does so within the confines of a genre it essentially invented<sup>10</sup>. For the 2018 *Halloween* to progress to where it has, it took several key players to see that the film needed a more thoughtful narrative reconstruction. David Gordon Green, Danny McBride, Jeff Fradley, John Carpenter, and Jamie Lee Curtis were collectively invested in providing a necessary revision of the plot and they all collectively have the power of a multi-million dollar franchise<sup>11</sup>, which allows them to rework the narrative. However, the 2018 *Halloween* is not the only or even the first slasher film to subvert stereotypical tropes, and venture into a new territory.

---

<sup>10</sup> I am not asserting here, however, that *Halloween* (1978) invented the slasher film, but by including all of the slasher tropes, and presenting the cyclical nature of the franchised final girl for arguably the first time, it has emerged as *the* slasher film franchise, with *the* recognizable franchised final girl. I am asserting rather that it is a template that other films are held against, similar to what scholars such as Adam Rockoff have said.

<sup>11</sup> \$616,339,724 worldwide box office grossing for all 11 films ("Box Office History for *Halloween* Films").



## FILM SUMMARY/FORECAST \*SPOILER ALERT\*

Though both of these films are lesser known, they present a complex and critical look at victimization, overtly providing cultural commentary on violence toward women, especially in the era of the ‘Me Too’ movement. *You’re Next* follows the plot line of Crispian (AJ Bowen) as he brings his new girlfriend Erin (Sharni Vinson) to a family dinner at his parent’s remote mansion in the woods, where the dinner is shattered by a gang of masked men<sup>12</sup> who attempt to take down the family with brutal precision (fig. 5). The men are hit with a surprise when they realize that Erin shows a hidden talent for fighting back. In addition to this violent plot, the film offers a dark secret to audiences that Crispian and his brother Felix (Nicholas Tucci) as well as Felix’s girlfriend Zee (Wendy Glenn) have hired the men to attack the family in order to inherit the patriarch’s family fortune. After discovering this secret, Erin proceeds to kill all opposing characters in the film including her boyfriend Crispian in a surprising end scene, leaving her alone with police coming through the doors.



Fig. 5. “Lamb Mask,” “Tiger Mask,” and “Fox Mask” *You’re Next*.

---

<sup>12</sup> Credited as “Lamb Mask,” “Tiger Mask,” and “Fox Mask” (*You’re Next*).

*Hush* follows the story line of Maddie Young (Kate Siegel), a deaf and mute writer who has retreated into the woods to live a solitary life in order to write, with audiences only aware of two other active characters, a young couple, Sarah (Samantha Sloan) and John (Michael Trucco), who live within walking distance. After a brief visit with Maddie, Sarah finds herself pursued by a masked killer<sup>13</sup> (John Gallagher Jr.) (fig. 6), who finds himself fascinated by Maddie when she shows no sign of hearing Sarah's desperate pleas as he attacks her outside Maddie's window. After killing Sarah on Maddie's front porch, the killer decides to pursue her further, and she finds herself fighting for her life. The film thus begins an intricate game of cat and mouse, with only Maddie emerging victorious after an intense final battle, where she kills the man, with police lights illuminating the final scenes.



Fig. 6. "The Man" *Hush*.

Viewed with an uncritical eye, Erin and Maddie both fit into audience expectation of final girls who continue to work within the slasher formula and thus the final girl stereotype. Both women are pitted against male killers who wear masks (Fig. 5 and 6) ("The Man" *Hush*;

---

<sup>13</sup> Credited name "The Man" (*Hush*).

“Lamb Mask,” “Tiger Mask,” and “Fox Mask” *You’re Next*), who stalk the women in a realistic setting (both films take place in semi-remote<sup>14</sup> houses in the woods), ending in the survival of a singular woman who audiences see as the final girl. Both films check the boxes and thus are categorically slasher films. However, what both films do differently is begin to alienate audiences from what they are used to seeing in a slasher film. Though voyeurism is present, it is subverted through multiple viewpoints (in *Hush*), and a metaphorical yet active gazing in the form of windows (in *You’re Next*). In addition, Erin and Maddie as the film’s heroines and final girls, challenge culturally accepted femininity by being strong, fighting women within their respective films. Lastly, both films alienate the audience through providing a final ending to the film, with no indication of franchising on the horizon, and present Erin and Maddie as *final* final girls with an ending that asks for a critical and pointed reflection on the part of both characters as well as the audience.

Though both films are overtly slasher, they challenge the standard formula by subtly playing with the elements, so to speak, and alienating the audience. To illustrate a new critical feminist horror paradigm I trace the trajectory of both final girls from opening to closing credits, focusing on the three main slasher genre conventions, which these films subvert: the male gaze, the use of weaponry/fighting, and the finality or ending of the film. Moreover, I highlight the ability of the slasher film to generate audience reflection on a more critical, culturally sensitive representation of violence toward women, ultimately calling for the introduction of finality and resolution of the violent narrative of the slasher film, which requires critical reflection on the part of the audience. I argue that both Maddie and Erin in their respective films represent a turn

---

<sup>14</sup> Both houses appear remote, but audiences are aware that neighbors are close by, within walking distance from both houses.

toward strong, but flawed, aggressive women depicted in film, who are able to use whatever means necessary to survive. Furthermore they are allowed to be the women they were initially characterized as, regardless of violent opposition, meaning they do not become different people because violence is introduced into the plot. All of these elements, as I argue, make up a new feminist horror paradigm and a turn toward asserting critically and socially sensitive slasher films within the ‘Me Too’ era, where the consequences of such entertainment demands a change. Thus, through this analysis I unpack representations of these women while demonstrating how they challenge the problematic understanding of femininity, both culturally and with regard to the horror film genre, and re-evaluate horror as, “not just a feminist possibility, but as a feminist necessity” (Gillmor 20).

**“I CAN COME IN ANYTIME I WANT. AND I CAN GET YOU, ANYTIME I WANT”:**

### **MALE GAZE/VOYEURISM**

Fifteen minutes into *Hush*, audiences are witness to the terrifying gaze of the killer as he watches Maddie typing on her computer (fig. 7). Maddie is unaware of the killer’s movements, as being a deaf woman she cannot hear him approach, but audiences watch in horror as the man actively and forcefully emerges as an integral part of the narrative. As audiences watch the man watch Maddie they are both intrigued by the man’s intrigue, but made uncomfortable by Maddie’s inability to hear the danger she is in. The man in this intense scene perfects the active gaze of the male onto the passive female. Mulvey states, “Traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen” (38). According to Mulvey, the eroticism is a power-dynamic between active male and passive female, which is expertly displayed in *Hush*, as noted above. However, it is important to note that in a horror film male victims can also fall under the gaze of the killer. The difference is that their death is often swift, with a significantly shorter screen time than the female victim, especially the final girl. A prime example of the male gaze as it applies to the male victim is Sarah’s husband John in *Hush*. His character appears toward the end of the film (0:52:30), and is given only seven minutes of screen time before he is killed (0:59:50). Audiences are looking for the victimization of women, the cat and mouse game between violent man and victimized woman, which ultimately results in audiences gazing upon vulnerable women, which is the case in the opening moments of *Hush*.



Fig. 7. “The Man” watching Maddie through the sliding glass door as she works in *Hush*.

The male gaze is always present within a horror film, as audiences are always watching a killer, however culture has deemed this outdated active man/passive woman trope as regressive in nature, as women are not longer necessarily presented as the lustful object of a male character’s desire. This desire can be seen as the audiences’ abject self. Creed analyzes Kristeva’s idea of the abject by stating, “The place of the abject is the place where meaning collapses... [if] the abject threatens life; it must be ‘radically excluded’ from the place of the living subject... and deposited on the other side of an imaginary border which separates the self from that which threatens the self” (9). This border can be thought of as an imaginary line within the human subconscious, much like a wall, which stops people from acting animalistic, or at the very least, acting in a way that is monstrous and indefinable in the grand scheme of society. In the case of the slasher film audiences are meant to have the killer’s point of view and that keeps their internal abjections at bay, as they see them played out on screen via the killer. In *Hush* audiences are shown the killer’s perspective, going as far as to come inside and stand behind her watching as she works, a prime example of the male gaze. Audiences are not committing the

killing, they are simply watching, so they are placing themselves on one side of the border, and the killer on the other.

Though the gaze is considered a regression, the male gaze is always present in some form within the slasher film, whether it is through the killer's perspective or through a window, as audiences are watching the movie to see their socially unacceptable desires played out on screen. By watching the movie, audiences are thus participating in the male gaze, unable to separate themselves from the screen. Kaja Silverman in *The Subject of Semiotics* furthers the trajectory of theorizing the place of the audience in regards to film viewership and how their perception is altered, with the idea of "suture." At its core suture is, "the name given to the procedures by means of which cinematic texts confer subjectivity upon their viewers" (Silverman 195). In the form of the slasher film, the watching of the killer is the audience being sutured into the perspective of the killer, taking the male gaze a step further, toward a mixture of fear and abjection. Audiences are thus sutured to the man in *Hush* as he watches Maddie. This voyeurism, or watching, is a well-known element of the slasher film. Perhaps one of the most notable examples in slasher history is Michael Myers watching his naked sister (Judith) as she brushes her hair at her vanity in the 1978 *Halloween* before killing her (fig. 8). Audiences are privy to this private scene through the eyeholes of Michael's infamous mask, a move that provides safety for the audience to watch the violence that occurs next.



Fig. 8. View from Michael's mask after killing his sister Judith in *Halloween* 1978.

Overall, the male gaze is altered in *Hush* as audience members are not witnessing Maddie in a sexually desirable moment in comparison to a scene like Michael watching his unclothed sister in *Halloween* (1978). Audiences, instead observe a young woman, dressed casually in jeans and a loose shirt and jacket, working at her computer. As the slasher formula notes, audiences are meant to be fearful of what might happen to Maddie, but also instinctually wish to see her victimized. However, they do not desire her in this moment, nor do they desire to see her tortured, because the male gaze is not presented as erotic or sexualized, and used in a way that alienates the audience from what is happening on screen. This is a pivotal scene in the movie, because audiences are not necessarily sutured to the killer as would be typical of the slasher film. They fear what is happening, but the subjective angle of the camera allows audiences to not only see what the killer sees but also what an omniscient "other" would see, *and* what Maddie sees (fig. 9 and fig. 10). The audience is acting monstrously as they let themselves watch Maddie, however, it is mixed with a fear and suturing of the audience to Maddie; as the audience's perspective changes erratically from hers to the man's. The killer is indisputably watching



Maddie through the windows and sliding glass door, even going as far as to take pictures of her with her own phone for an added contemporary effect, which instills a fear that overshadows any erotic or abject urges. The man is thus creating a type of gaze that is permanent, forever frozen on the memory of the cellphone and perhaps the memory of the audience. In juxtaposition to *Halloween* (1978), audiences don't witness the violence through the eyeholes of the killer's mask, and in fact, "the man" sheds the mask early on in the film, a disruption to the male gaze as the safety of the mask for the audience is lost. He is however subverting the audience's safety by using Maddie's phone as a site of the male gaze. An object that would be comforting to an audience is thus the conduit for their abject desires, a flipping of the script that successfully leaves audiences uncomfortable.

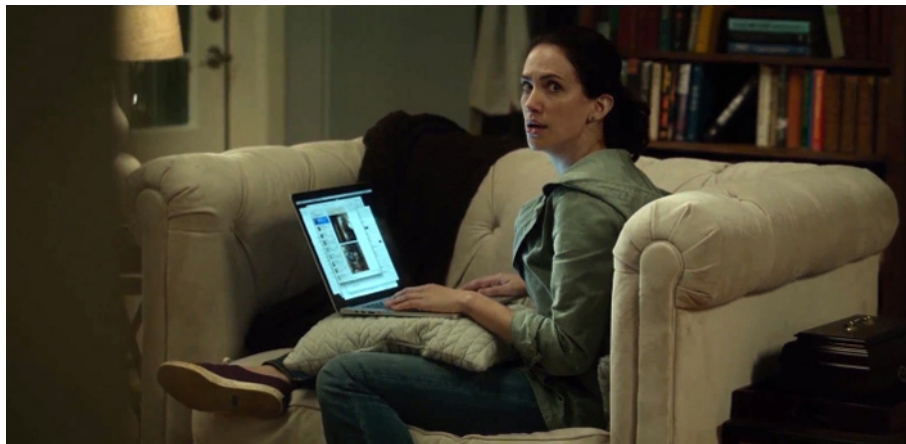


Fig. 9. "The Man's" perspective of Maddie in *Hush*.



Fig. 10. Maddie's perspective of "the Man" in *Hush*.

After recognizing that she is being watched, Maddie slowly brings the killer into her sights through the open patio door, and audiences have a clear view of what she is seeing. However being that audiences had the view of the killer and an alternate view, they are thrown into this push and pull of fear, perhaps ignoring their initial desires to see Maddie killed and/or presented in a sexual manner, a move that Silverman asserts makes the viewers desire for closure that much more intense (206). Audiences are no longer safe hidden behind the mask of the killer; they now find themselves in danger.

Further, after Maddie has come face-to-face with the killer and rushes to lock the windows and doors within the house, the killer slowly moves from the back yard to the front, with Maddie carefully tracking his movements through the windows; a reversal of the roles of cat and mouse. Audiences are again sutured to Maddie and are fearful of the path of the killer, but also in power in this moment, as she is able to watch him through her windows, locking the doors just before he appears. Similarly, in a reversal of the roles, Laurie finds herself chasing Michael through the house in *Halloween 2018*, a revisiting of the iconic scene from the 1978 film, where Michael chases Laurie into a closet. The reversal of the gaze forces the audience into an uncomfortable situation. Audiences feel a suturing to both characters within these pivotal

scenes, causing them to rethink their reactions to the violence that ensues. In a similar way, voyeurism in a slasher film is often projected through a window, the perfect open view for a killer to stand and watch the unknowing victim. One of the subverted genre elements within *You're Next* is this voyeurism, as it is not presented in the typical way you would see it in a slasher film, taking the active gaze a step further. Audiences are still sutured to the killer and witness abjection, but it is portrayed in a different way.

In *You're Next*, audiences witness a gaze that is not what is expected. The film relies on the prevalence of windows, used as the voyeuristic representation of the male gaze, both trapping the terrified family and providing a unique weapon for Erin. The masked trio (Fox, Tiger, and Lamb mask) who are in opposition to the family primarily attack through the windows of the mansion rather than coming inside, until it is necessary, making sure the family is successfully trapped. The very first attack comes from the window, a silent arrow that kills Tariq (Ti West), the daughter Aimee's (Amy Seimetz) boyfriend and a well-placed piano cord later kills Aimee as she tries to escape through the front door. Both are openings that provide a gaze for the audience, and present a unique fear for the family, as the structure of the building keeps the killers outside, much like *Hush*, but also keeps the family inside, preventing escape. Thus the windows represent the active presence Mulvey asserts is present within a film. The windows actively keep the family in a state of terror, much like the male gaze, when projected onto a specific character within the plot. The killers are using the windows as a form of control, and rather than projecting this control for the audience through the eyes of the killer's it is used through the active presence of windows. The windows are used as sites of control and they are the clear frames through which these processes of violence are felt and delivered throughout the film (fig. 11).



Fig. 11. “Tiger mask” emerging through the window in *You’re Next*.

However, a further alienation for the audience is that Erin is not presented as the erotic form of audience desires, similar to Maddie in *Hush*. Not only is she not the object of their voyeuristic needs, Erin uses the windows as weapons themselves. In a scene of fight or flight, Erin uses the window to her benefit, running towards it and directly crashing through it from the second story, when she comes face-to-face with one of the masked strangers, an interesting use of abjection in that audiences are alienated by this aggressive choice. She crashes through the second story window without second thought saving herself from the control of the killer, and using that attempted control to her benefit. Though Erin did not think twice, the audience is forced to consider her choice in a way that alienates them from the characters on screen. The audience continues to feel a suturing to the killers, as they are the active threat, however this suture begins to pull away as Erin subjects herself to the abject not to act on violent desires, but rather to save herself, a direct act of smashing a voyeuristic frame of active viewing. This change to the formula disrupts audience’s perceptions and forces them to think about this aggressive scene as more than a cinematic choice, but a forced position where Erin was made to make a smart, yet abject, choice.

What this inversion of the male gaze also results in is an active role for the audience to find a way out of the situation, much like the Erin and Maddie, whose point of view they are sutured to. Without the active and recognizable gaze of the killer in the way that audiences expect, they are thus met with the terrifying knowledge that they now need to work alongside the final girl in the film to get out of the situation. What results is a consideration of the various ways a woman could remove herself from the situation by any means necessary, using any weaponry she can find. When the watcher becomes the watched, the doors open for a more complex use of weaponry and strength for the final girl.

## **“GRAB ANYTHING THAT MIGHT MAKE A GOOD WEAPON”: WEAPONRY, FIGHTING BACK, AND A CULTURALLY CONSIDERATE REPRESENTATION**

From Erin’s use of a broken blender and pot of boiling water, to Maddie’s use of a fire alarm and an aerosol spray can, both women are skilled in using mundane household items as weaponry to their benefit. Though this is not unique to the slasher genre, recognizing this skill in both women as a crucial part of their character allows the possibility to theorize them as acting monstrous, in that they become the active, fighting, character, who asks the audience to revel in their abjection, as they use any item possible as a weapon. To reiterate, Creed states in response to the abject that, “the concept of the border is central to the construction of the monstrous in the horror film; that which crosses or threatens to cross the ‘border’ is abject and thus monstrous” (11). Often within a horror film, audiences recognize the primary agent of violence or the one that is acting monstrous as an image of a male figure fighting the monster, demon, killer etc. If the female characters or specifically the final girl fights back, she is doing so because there is a force that is opposing her; it is not necessarily considered an active characteristic. However, there are many strong, active, women fighters in film that are admired (e.g. *Kill Bill*, *Resident Evil*, *Alien*), but often women are seen as violent only if the situation calls for it, a cultural norm that is ever present in the slasher film.

What this demonstrates is the idea that *any* woman can fight back if presented with the right opposition, but what is problematic is that women are not allowed to be the aggressor in any form; she must merely be fighting in response to opposition rather than work as the opposition herself. This further places women characters into a binary of the woman who fights against the opposition (the final girl) and the one who doesn’t (dead girl). Society views women fighters in the same way as women athletes as Andrea Paloian states, “Females’ participation in

sports is often thought to be less appreciated...since athletics are primarily male dominated and characterized by masculine qualities, such as strength, aggression, and competition” (Paloian). Using that logic, any woman who displays characteristics of strength, aggression, and competition, will be seen as masculine based on preconceived notions of gender, especially gender in sport, sport having a broad definition. All of these preconceived notions about women follow into film culture, especially in the case of the slasher film; defensive behaviors are attached to unrelated gender categories. This particular genre wants to further imbricate gendered behaviors with that of violence in order to perpetuate the narrative audiences recognize, when a violent threat to a human body should allow for the threatened to react with cunning and skill regardless of gender.

Erin in *You're Next* is a prime example of a strong, aggressive female, as throughout the movie audiences are reminded of her survivalist roots, as she hunts the masked men, using her cunning nature as a weapon. Her aggression in killing the first masked man represents Erin as masculine, as she uses a meat tenderizer to kill the man in the tiger mask. However, as audiences see through the rest of the film, Erin uses her cunning and resilient nature to survive, a move that defies categorization, especially gender categorization. However, a naturally human vulnerability is not completely absent as there are many scenes that indicate she is a critically thoughtful character presented with a frightening, violent moment.



Fig. 12. Erin watches for the killer to cross the light through the keyhole in *You're Next*.

This is a move I argue that allows Erin to gain more psychological certainty that represents a more critical feminist representation audiences have yet to see in a slasher film. In presenting her as cunning, but also not over-prepared in that she is indestructible, audiences are witnessing a character who is actively in charge of her own bodily and psychological certainty. In one scene (fig. 12), audiences see Erin watching the killer move, as she stays hidden behind the basement door (0:55:53). When the man in the lamb mask finds her and begins to break down the door, audiences witness a real moment from Erin, who screams and begins to panic until the opportunity presents itself for her to save herself, where she uses an icepick to attack the killer. Though audiences witness an aggressive, resilient woman, who uses her mind as a weapon, they simultaneously witness a woman placed into a violent narrative who reacts in complex ways just as often as she presents her strength. The slasher narrative depends on a certain level of fear and threat, and both films are bound to participate in it to a point. In *Hush* Maddie shows audiences a different form of resilience, as she skillfully defies capture multiple times. She escapes the house in several different scenes, reminding the man that it will not be an easy “game” for him, as he considers it. In addition to Erin, Maddie uses whatever item she can



to survive including a hammer, the killer's crossbow, an aerosol can, a fire alarm, and ultimately a corkscrew, in the final battle scene between her and the man.

The final girls in both films dispute the conceptualization of fighting as a gendered pursuit, especially as it applies to the structured violence of a slasher film. Furthermore both women participate in an agency of violence where women can be seen as an aggressor. Erin and Maddie's ability to fight when no other alternate approach proves successful, and depicts both women as strong and capable of culturally depicted masculine pursuits (like violence), in the absence of men, thus granting them agency. In both instances, the male characters in the movie are either the pursuers, killed, or part of the violent plot and ultimately killed. The women are left to their own capabilities, showing that despite being women and perhaps scorned for being aggressive, they are fully capable of saving themselves through staying logical, working abjectly in a way that does not focus on female victimization, and ultimately successfully fighting back.

In the case of *Hush*, Maddie keeps her decisions logic based in order to keep the killer outside. After locking all of the doors, being plunged into darkness as the killer switches off the power, and watching helplessly as he slashes her car tires, Maddie makes a logical move toward finding what she can to save herself. Using her mind, she chooses to communicate with the killer, writing, "won't tell didn't see face boyfriend coming home" on the sliding glass door with lipstick (0:25:22), hoping to plead with him. Though the killer continues to toy with her (taking off his mask, and speaking to her directly), Maddie is not deterred and continues finding creative, logical ways to fight back. In another scene, Maddie uses her car alarm (pointed through the kitchen windows) to distract the man long enough to search the body of her dead neighbor, Sarah, left outside by the killer, for a phone. The killer catches her in the act and Maddie slams the hammer down into his forearm, injuring him for the first time in the film (0:33:31-0:34:58).

Similarly, in *You're Next* Erin uses random household tools to her benefit, especially in a scene early on in the movie. Mirroring Maddie, she is grabbed by the back of the head by one of the masked killers, through the kitchen window. Erin doesn't hesitate as she stabs the man wearing the fox mask in the arm, and instantly searches a nearby drawer for another weapon, only to find the killer gone when she turns back around (0:37:15-0:37:36). Despite surviving this moment, Erin doesn't waste any time awaiting the next attack, keeping her sights on the situation rather than panicking.

In both cases, the women are presented with unexpected secret skills for both the audience and killer that allow them to survive. In *Hush*, being deaf allows Maddie to battle against her killer in ways he would not expect. In an intense scene, Maddie holds herself in the bathroom awaiting the killer to come through the door. The killer instead comes in through the window behind her and approaches Maddie. He decides to taunt her further, though she cannot hear him, and as he exhales to speak, Maddie feels the breath on her back, and is able to escape his attack. The killer decided to use her disability to his advantage, and instead Maddie escapes, her heightened other senses saving her. Similarly, Erin's background presents a unique opportunity for her to escape the violence in any way that she can, including jumping through a window, laying complex traps, and using a digital camera to blind the killer, all choices that represent her survivalist background and allowing her to survive.

However, the cunning of these women does not stop with random household items, it also includes the use of complex weaponry, as seen in the examples above. Maddie continues to use weapons (hammer, knife, etc.) before ultimately disarming the killer of his own weapon (a crossbow), and loading it herself in a desperate scene, and successfully shooting him in the shoulder. In addition, Erin presents an interesting twist to the film, as she begins to hunt the

killers using complex traps when they are ultimately lured into the house. In one scene Erin creates sets of traps that include boards with nails sticking up in them, which she strategically places in sight of the window, and just below it, resulting in one of them pushing a nail through their foot (1:08:43) (fig. 13-15).



Fig. 13. The killer's view of the trap right inside of the window in *You're Next*.

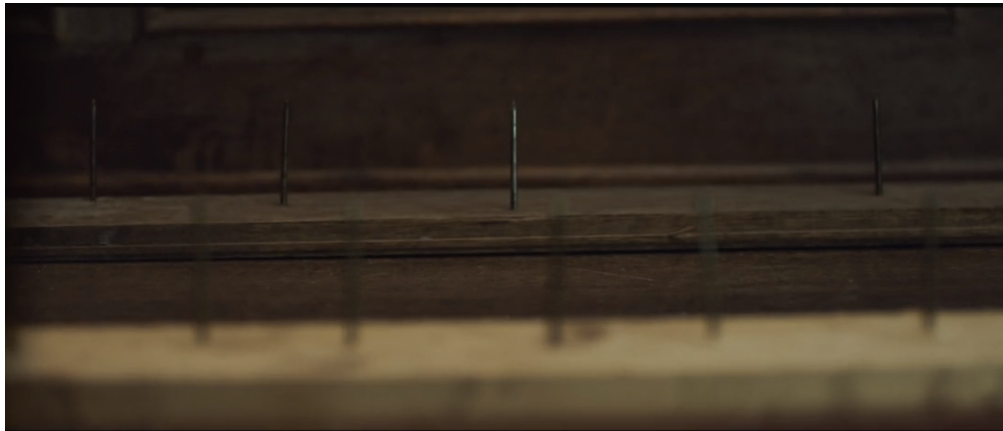


Fig. 14. The audience's view of *both* board traps in *You're Next*.



Fig. 15. The killer after stepping on the board he did not see in *You're Next*.

Last, and perhaps most crucial, both women use their cunning to find help. Maddie is able to use her knowledge as a writer to indicate to others who has harmed her, as the killer is breaking his way into the house (1:08:30). This scene works as an important commentary on the cultural impact of violence, as Maddie is attempting to make sure that no one will be hurt by the man again as she accurately describes his features onto the end of her novel manuscript. Though she finds herself unable to produce an ending for her novel, when it comes time to end the violence, she acts logically and writes a finalized ending for herself.

Similarly, after the first death in *You're Next*, Erin acts logically, demanding everyone to get down, and instructing someone to call 911, before they realize something is obstructing their cell service. Later in the movie, audiences witness a conversation with Erin and her boyfriend Crispian, wherein Erin is using her phone to text 911 to which Crispian responds with, "That's useless" (*You're Next*). There is a dismissive tone to Crispian's voice as he tells Erin this, but she continues anyway saying, "we have to try something" (*You're Next*). Still Crispian continues to question Erin's motives simply stating, "I've never seen you act like this before" (*You're Next*), a question of Erin's abilities as a strong fighting woman, a question that follows to the final moments of the film where Crispian reflects that Erin's survival skills are "...actually sort of

weird by the way” (*You’re Next*). Both women use their cunning and logical use of weaponry to thwart their killers and survive the film.

Furthermore, both women fight their way through not only the violent plot of the film, but also the integral final moments, in order to survive and participate in an active de-suturing or re-suturing of the audience into a new narrative of *final* final girl who resists the male gaze, takes up weaponry to participate in the monstrous and abject, and who lives at the end not to be franchised, but rather to alienate audiences from the usual/typical victimization of the slasher film. The representation of strong fighting women who resist in the slasher film is an apt metaphor for women of today; women who are resisting the expected cycles of abuse and violence and saying “me too.”

## **“I STUCK A BLENDER ON HIS HEAD AND KILLED HIM: FINAL SCENES, TOXIC FEMININITY, AND THE *FINAL* FINAL GIRL**

The 2018 *Halloween* represents a turn toward a more critical depiction of female trauma, but by including Michael breathing after the final credits the filmmakers suggest that the victimization is far from over; Michael's breathing suggests further trauma of not only one, but three final girls, as Laurie, her daughter, and her granddaughter have survived Michael's attack. This turn toward franchising, however, negates the progressive moves the film provided throughout. For a slasher film to be reasonably open to thoughtful, meaningful feminist critique, the film must have finality for the final girl and present closure for the audience to reflect upon rather than ignore, as they look toward a sequel or sequels. The violent trauma women continue to feel should end, and they should be able to witness fictional characters resist such victimization and thus enact that resistance in their own lives. At the end of *Hush* and *You're Next* both women emerge victorious the last breath heard being theirs; they are ultimately the *final* final girls.

To continue to victimize women by franchising their trauma, the film industry is perpetuating toxic femininity, which is similar to toxic masculinity a term more familiar to slasher audiences. Toxic masculinity is defined as “the constellation of socially regressive male traits that serve to foster domination, the devaluation of women, homophobia, and wanton violence” (Kupers 714). In a similar light, women are taught to devalue representation of themselves to the point of fitting specifically into stereotypes or rejecting women who don't; violence is considered a male pursuit. Toxic femininity is as much a cultural regression as toxic masculinity is, and is present in the horror film just as much as toxic masculinity, which is often seen in the form of overly violent men. Women are typically questioned when they step up and

defend themselves and others, destabilizing the cultural norm of the silent (screaming) victim or the “lucky” final girl. Both Maddie and Erin, take an alternate role in their respective films, and upset cultural views of femininity. But more than that, both women characters survive and successfully end the violence, a move that the writers, producers, directors, etc., made to defy the franchising of their trauma.

Despite going through violence themselves, both women characters survive their respective films as the slasher formula dictates. However, unlike the slasher films before them, *Hush* and *You're Next* present audiences with a new ending, one that works as a *final* final ending, with both women being *final* final girls. As audiences witness the police lights coming up the hill in *Hush* (fig. 16) and revel in Erin's vengeful ending, they are left with something that slasher audiences have not seen before: an ending that requires a critical reflection on who has survived; a reflection on who is left breathing in the end. Audiences are thus presented with an addition to the formula, one that requires them to consider the real-world implications of both films. An addition that causes them to be alienated by what is happening on the screen, allowing for reflection. Bertolt Brecht theorized the idea of *Verfremdungseffekt* (a-effect), which is “the technique of defamiliarizing a word, an idea, a gesture so as to enable the spectator to see or hear it afresh” (Diamond 79). This distancing effect forces the audience to become a critical viewer of whatever text is being preformed before them. A-effect can also be seen as having a purpose of which, “to denaturalize and defamiliarize what ideology makes seem normal, acceptable, inescapable” (79). Audiences are made to be un-familiar with what is happening on the screen, text, and stage before them in order to question the ideology of what makes this seem obscure or confusing, as Brecht theorizes. When slasher audiences are presented with two plot lines that successfully end they are presented with a moment that is different from what they are familiar

with. A and addition to the formula that upsets the one presented by the *Halloween* franchise allows audiences to question why the latter is perhaps problematic.



Fig. 16. The final moments of *Hush*.

The most effective use of this questioning occurs within the last minutes of *Hush*. Audiences see Maddie begin to make her way to the kitchen, losing strength from her wounds, deciding to feign unconsciousness and wait for the killer to find her, slumped against the kitchen cupboards. As the man approaches her, Maddie opens her eyes and sprays him in the face with an aerosol spray can, debilitating him, and finding herself with the upper hand. After an intense back and forth, Maddie successfully defeats the killer by attacking him with a corkscrew and crawls outside to sit on her deck as police lights soundlessly come up the hill. With this ending that promises finality, audiences are thus forced to reflect on the traumatic experience Maddie just survived. The killer does not jump up at the end, nor does the audience hear him breathing after the credit roll “undoing” all of the clever violence Maddie has employed to save herself only for more of his cruel threatening behavior to trap her yet again inside of a franchise.

Though *You're Next* presents a more complex ending, there is still finality to Erin's story and a compelling narrative to unpack. When Erin finds out about the dark plan of Crispian and



his brother, she expertly defends herself against Felix and Zee, killing Felix with a broken blender, and Zee with a knife. As Erin collapses onto the floor beside Felix (fig. 17), his phone begins to ring and Crispian begins to unravel the secret further. Crispian enters the house, and sees Erin for the first time since leaving the attack. After listening wordlessly to Crispian's explanation for why he and Felix decided to attack their family, and listening to him blackmail her, she decides to kill him as well; a move that unfortunately is seen by the police officer that she has called to protect her. An even more complex ending to the story is that the police officer enters through the front door, where Erin has expertly assembled an "axe-drop" trap meant for the earlier masked killers. Though the audience doesn't fully see what happens to the police officer (as the credit roll begins right after the axe drops), the implication is that the police officer falls prey to Erin's trap meant to protect her from the real threat. Audiences are not privy to the exact ending, however, with all of the masked killers dead, there is finality to Erin's story in regard to her trauma. Again, no killer jumps up, nor do audiences hear the killer's breathing at the end of the credit roll. As the police have now arrived, there may be an investigation into the situation<sup>15</sup>, but that is up to the audience to consider as they simultaneously consider what Erin has been put through. It still follows that Erin's situation is at an end, or at least the situation that is of importance to the slasher film. The abrupt ending to the film works as a question mark which seems like less of an invitation to a horror sequel wherein Erin must defend herself yet again, and more in line with the idea that because she has survived this type of violence, it is

---

<sup>15</sup> The credit roll presents to audiences an investigation photo of Erin with "Suspect?" written on it, and the implication is that Erin has emerged as a main suspect (*You're Next*). However, the question mark represents a certain form of uncertainty to this implication, and with the other "evidence" (i.e. Masked killers, phone calls, the dead neighbors, etc.) it's arguable that Erin will emerge victorious. However, this is not on the audience to dissect, and as there has been no sequel to negate this, Erin successfully ends the violent narrative.

difficult to imagine what life would be like after, a question audiences are considering in real time as well.



Fig. 17. Erin collapses to the floor after fighting off Felix and Zee in *You're Next*.

If audiences are made to recognize Michael's breathing at the end of *Halloween* 2018 as the equivalent of a question to Laurie's story, a question of if he will return to kill her, then Erin's return, as the killers are dead, would work to repeat what audience have already seen. The violence has happened and a sequel that forces Erin to reenact the violence would be illogical. Regardless, what I am arguing about is a closer inspection into what the audience knows to be true having just watched the film. In both cases, audience know that Maddie and Erin fought back with reason and logic, and in both cases they see an end to the violence, and ending that focuses on their direction as final girls, and more importantly an ending that critically and sensitively approaches both women's experience with trauma.

## **“STAY HERE. I’VE GOT TO FINISH THIS”: CONCLUSIONS**

By using both of these films as examples, audiences can see the slasher film becoming more flexible. The women’s place in the slasher genre is improving, moving away from the original formula set by *Halloween* (1978), as well as the language surrounding the final girl. Audiences are presented with more powerful final girls who work as aggressive women who actively battle their killer to help save themselves and others. There is room for improvement, but by reflecting on the trauma of the final girl, and giving her an ending that provides closure, horror is making a strong step into a physical and psychological space where women (especially women on screen) have control over their own female mind and body. The cultural impact is that the slasher film continues to draw attention to how gender and sexuality is depicted, approached, and critically assessed. Clover asks, “But why, if viewers can identify across gender lines and if the root experience of horror is sex blind, are the screen sexes not interchangeable? ... The fact that horror film so stubbornly genders the killer male and the principal victim female would seem to suggest that representation itself is at issue” (209). The slasher genre often presents the male versus female dynamic, but in representing the genre as capable of change through these two films, audiences are given new potential representations, which focus on critical depictions of women in film.

In summary, these representations of women give both films the potential to construct feminine subjectivities capable of destabilizing gendered positionings and challenging feminine representation. From a feminist perspective, Lisa Lazard argues that depictions of femininity in fiction are extremely important because fictional representations are sites within which audiences negotiate understandings of gendered subjectivities (135). To which I agree. Negotiating understandings of gender in horror fiction is interesting precisely because horror has often

reproduced problematic gendered relationships, directly referencing the violent nature of the genre and providing a commentary on the man vs. woman trope. However, as Lazard also notes, “the construction of women in horror is complex, with women being positioned as victims but also as intelligent, resourceful and capable of defending themselves against violence” (135) as is the case with both final girls in the above films. Lazard continues saying that she does not suggest that the latter construction of women in horror is entirely unproblematic, but rather that this genre might offer a space in which to challenge problematic femininities (135), such as the franchised final girl. Both *Hush* and *You’re Next* can be used in order to challenge problematic femininities using the two main female characters as prime examples, especially as it relates to the final endings for both characters and their emergence as final *final* girls. By asserting the need for the subverted male gaze, the apt use of weaponry by an active female, and the final ending to the trauma, I argue that representing women in horror, especially those considered final girls, as *final* approaches the difficult issue of trauma in a critically feminist and culturally sensitive way.

Both final *final* girls represent an apt metaphor for the plight of women today, in the wake of a twenty-first century sexual revolution. As the hearing and appointment of Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh showed, traumatized women continue to be placed within a cycle of trauma akin to the slasher film. Social movements such as ‘Me Too’ make visible the need for critically approaching gender representation and calling out toxic masculinities and toxic femininities. Much like Erin, Maddie, and Laurie, real-world final girls like Dr. Christine Blasey Ford are demonstrating unwavering strength and courage in facing the terrors they survived, and audiences can't help but identify and empathize with them for that. Moreover, a focus on putting an end to franchising the final girl within the horror film makes visible the cyclical nature of pain

and trauma. Presenting two slasher films that force audiences to consider what could happen after the cameras stop rolling is the step toward asserting a feminist horror paradigm through the slasher film. Moreover, presenting two films that give both final girls an actual *final* ending places their breathing over that of the killer. They are the ones that matter, as the final breaths of the film keep the final girl alive to live, not merely to perpetuate the cycle of abuse and violence. Films such as *You're Next* and *Hush* give women a complicated voice that speaks back to this moment, but also provides the evidence needed for audiences to question toxic femininity and toxic masculinity while simultaneously forcing them to understand that the trauma of a woman needs a reassessment in regard to film. Giving the final girl the last word and the last breath in a slasher film is the only way to allow for this reassessment and thoughtful critique. Overall, establishing a focus on the victim and survivor for the first time, allowing her to share her story, and to overall get the last and final breath allows audiences to think, to exhale, and to say, "us too."

## WORKS CITED

- “About”. *Me too.*, 2018, <https://metoomvmt.org/about/>.
- Alemoru, Kemi. “How Scream Reinvented the Slasher Movie”, *Dazed*, 2016,  
<http://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/34098/1/how-scream-reinvented-the-slasher-movie>
- “All Halloween Films in Order”. *IMDB*, 2012, <https://www.imdb.com/list/ls004692335/>.
- Barnes, Kateryna. “Monsters in Modern Horror Culture Reflect Social Anxieties”. *Folio*, 2017.  
<https://www.folio.ca/monsters-in-modern-horror-culture-reflect-social-anxieties/>.
- “Box Office History for *Halloween* Movies”. *The Numbers*, 2019, <https://www.the-numbers.com/movies/franchise/Halloween#tab=summary>.
- Carroll, Noël. “Why Horror?”. *Horror, the Film Reader*, Ed. Mark Jancovich, 2001.
- Clover, Carol J. “Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film”. *Representation*, vol. 20, 1987, pp. 187–228.
- Clover, Carol J. *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, Princeton University Press, 1992.
- Diamond, Elin. “Brechtian Theory/Feminist Theory: Towards a Gestic Feminist Criticism”. *Performance Analysis An Introductory Coursebook*, 77-85. Wolf, Routledge, 2001.
- Gillmor, Allison. “Feminist Horror Plotting Against Patriarchy”. *Herizons*.
- Jackson, Matthew. “Halloween’s Danny McBride Explains Why Removing the Brother-Sister Canon Made the New Film Scariest”. *SyfyWire*, 2018.  
<https://www.syfy.com/syfywire/halloweens-danny-mcbride-explains-why-removing-the-brother-sister-canon-made-the-new-film>
- Halloween*. Directed by David Gordon Green, Performances by Jamie Lee Curtis, Judy Greer, Andi Matichak, and James Jude Courtney, Blumhouse Productions, 2018.

- Halloween*. Directed by John Carpenter. Performances by Jamie Lee Curtis, Donald Pleasence, Nancy Stephens, Tony Moran, and Nancy Kyes, Compass International Pictures, 1978.
- Hush*. Directed by Mike Flanagan, Performances by Kate Siegel, John Gallagher Jr., Michael Trucco, Samantha Sloyan, and Emma Graves, Blumhouse Productions, 2016.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror*, Columbia University Press: 1982.
- Lane, Carly. “Deep Cuts: Hush (2016)”. *SyfyWire*, 2018, <https://www.syfy.com/syfywire/deep-cuts-hush-2016>
- Lazard, Lisa. ““You’ll Like This—It’s Feminist!’ Representations of Strong Women in Horror Fiction”. *Feminism & Psychology*, Vol. 19(1): 132–136; 0959-3535 DOI: 10.1177/0959353508098627
- Lou, Clarisse. “‘It is a film about trauma’: How Halloween Became a Horror Movie for the #MeToo Era”. *Independent*, 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/features/halloween-horror-movie-metoo-movement-jamie-lee-curtis-sequel-a8588726.html>
- Millett, Kate. *Sexual Politics*, University of Illinois Press, 1969.
- Mulvey, Laura. “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, Eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, New York: Oxford UP, 1999: pp. 33-44.
- Paloian, Andrea. “The Female/Athlete Paradox: Managing Traditional Views of Masculinity and Femininity”. *Applied Psychology OPUS*. <http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/appsyh/opus/issues/2012/fall/female>
- Rockoff, Adam. *Going to Pieces the Rise and Fall of the Slasher Film, 1978-1986*, McFarland & Company, Inc. Publishers, 2002.

- Sabata, James. "Horror as Social Commentary". *JamesSabata.com*, 2018,  
<https://jamessabata.com/horror-as-social-commentary/>.
- Silverman, Kaja. *The Subject of Semiotics*, Oxford University Press, 1983.
- Strand, John. "You're Next (2013) Review". *HorrorFreakNews*, 2016,  
<https://horrorfreaknews.com/youre-next-2013-review>
- Williams, Linda. "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess". *Film Genre Reader III*, Ed. Barry  
Keith Grant, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003, pp. 141-159.
- You're Next*. Directed by Adam Wingard, Performances by Sharni Vinson, Nicholas Tucci,  
Wendy Glenn, AJ Bowen, Amy Seimetz, Ti West, Rob Moran, and Barbara Crampton,  
Snoot Entertainment, 2011.